

Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

Hermann Kreutzmann

Subject: Central Asia, Cultural Online Publication Date: May 2017

DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.46

Abstract and Keywords



The Pamirs have been a contested space in different periods of time. Access to fertile pastures characterized the local economic competition between nomads and mountain farmers. International attention reached its peak when the Pamirs became a pawn in the “Great Game”; during the second half of the 19th century, Great Britain and Russia disputed control over the mountainous area. Local and regional interests took on a subordinate role. The imperial contest resulted in dividing the Pamirs among four interested parties that are nowadays independent countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China. Since the division, separate developments have emerged in all parts that are abodes of farmers and pastoralists who share a common heritage but have experienced quite different political and social developments. Thus the Pamirs represent a focal region of similar ecological properties in which political and socioeconomic developments that originated in the 19th century have changed development paths through the Cold War period until the early 21st century. From Tsarist Russia to post-independence Tajikistan, from the Afghan monarchy to the post-Taliban republic, from British India to Pakistan, and from the Middle Kingdom to contemporary China, political interventions such as nationality policies and regional autonomy, sociotechnical experiments such as collectivization and subsequent deregulation, and varying administrative systems provide insight into external domination that has shaped separate developments in the Pamirs. In the early 21st century, the Pamirs experienced a revaluation as a transit corridor for transcontinental traffic arteries.

Keywords: Great Game, boundary-making, pastoralism, collectivization, Pamirs, Badakhshan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Xinjiang, Pakistan, China

Living in the Pamirs

The Pamirs form one important passage zone between South Asia and Central Asia, or—as 19th-century geographer Carl Ritter would have identified it in his monumental compilation on Asian geography in now-antiquated nomenclature—the Pamirs are located between Iran and Turan [Tajikistan], India and China.¹ In any respect, the region was quite remote and therefore the notion of the Pamirs is mainly that of a transition zone or an area for grazing livestock during summers (Fig. 1). During the Middle Ages this observation was shared by travelers, such as Marco Polo, who wrote that the animals on the Pamirian pastures were especially healthy and quickly fattened on the rich fodder resources.² Over long periods of time the Pamirs have been perceived as a harsh and repulsive mountainous space, home to scattered evaders from authoritarian control and occasional hunters and trespassers. The remote Pamirian mountain regions are split between Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China, and Pakistan at their respective peripheries. The usage of the singular and plural term Pamir(s) has various disciplinary and historical roots.

Geologists refer to Pamir as an orographic mountain system that distinguishes itself from the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Kun Lun Shan, and which culminates in the Pamirian Knot. Local usage of Pamirs goes back to a multitude of high mountain pastures that are referred to in local vernaculars, meaning “high pasture.”³ The Pamirian interface represents a remote assemblage of high ranges, deeply incised valleys, and extensive plateaux embedded and placed between important population centers in Europe, India, Iran, and China.

Historical Geography of the Pamirs



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 1: The Pamirian region is located between the Alai and Hindukush Mountains in contrast to the lowlands of the Fergana Valley, the Bactrian plains, and the Takla Makan Shamo. In the 21st century, the region is divided between four countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and the People's Republic of China.

Source: Modified from Hermann Kreutzmann, "Pamir or Pamirs. Perceptions and Interpretations," in *Mapping Transition in the Pamirs: Changing Human-Environmental Landscapes*, ed. Hermann Kreutzmann and Teiji Watanabe (Cham: Springer, 2016), 19. Design and © Hermann Kreutzmann.⁴⁶



The specific ecology of the Pamirs is characterized by elevated mountain plateaux that range higher than 3,500 meters above sea level. Located in an extreme arid environment, the extensive grassy patches are nourished by glacier melt waters which replenish the groundwater tables close to the surface where fodder plants can survive. Most Pamirs expand over dozens to hundreds of kilometers and have lakes that are preferred settlement sites for the area's users. Few people lived permanently in the harsh mountain environment in earlier times, although artifacts have been recorded from seasonal visitors since the Stone Age. Even today the population density is very

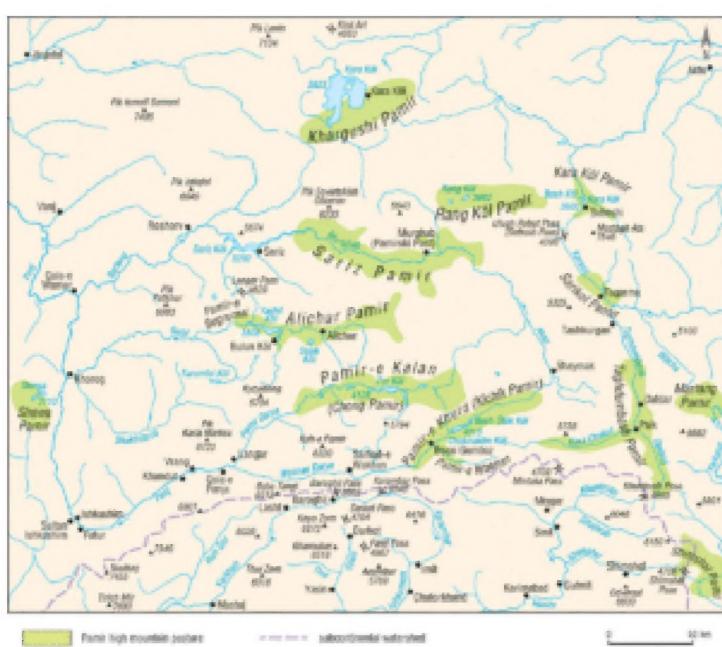
low. Chinese pilgrims, such as Xuanzang, who traversed the mountain barrier between Central and South Asia in 644 CE addressed it as the Po-mi-lo, the Pamir Valley.⁴ Other pilgrims and travelers have described the Pamirs in its plateau-like appearance in Persian language as *bam-e dunya* (the roof of the world), in Kirghiz as *muztagh* (snowy mountains), or in Chinese as *tsunling* (onion mountains). The term "Pamir" is derived from local vernacular expressions for fertile high mountain pastures. The Wakhi inhabitants of the higher-lying valleys call their elevated grazing grounds *pamér*, a term and ascription in regular use even in the 21st century.⁵ The Wakhi language belongs to the so-called Pamirian languages" within the Eastern Iranian language group that is predominantly represented in the Western Pamirs but has spread further south and east.⁶

The fertile ground of the natural pastures seasonally attracted visiting pastoralists such

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

for Pamirian people from other valleys in the Western Pamirs such as Bartangi and Shughni, as well as from the Taghdumbash Pamir in Sarikol located close to Tashkurgan (Fig. 2). Occasional game hunters followed the tracks of ibex, Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis ammon polii*), and snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) during cold seasons into the remote plateaux.

The Kirghiz and Pamirian communities were both settlers and frequent visitors of the Pamirs. Both have been distinguished by their faith and “traditional” occupation. Kirghiz belong to the Sunni denomination of Islam and look back on a nomadic-pastoral tradition that was shaped by mobility and animal husbandry. Wakhi and other Pamirian dwellers belong to the Ismaili denomination of Islam and can be termed as combined mountain farmers who have applied a dual approach of resource utilization that is based on irrigated crop cultivation and livestock keeping.⁷



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 2: Seven major Pamirs and seven smaller ones can be referred to as “the Pamirs.” They are mainly positioned in the mountainous interface north of the subcontinental watershed between Central and South Asia. In the heart of the Pamirs originates the Oxus river system, nowadays better known as the Panj River in its upper reaches and Amu Darya further south as the major artery between the Pamirs and the Aral Sea. The Western Pamirs are composed by the deeply incised valleys that flow eastwards toward the Panj River such as Vanj, Bartang, Gunt, and Shakhdarra. The extensive Pamirian plateaux are found in the north-south sequence from Khargushi, Rang Köl, Sariz, Alichur, Pamir-e Kalan, Pamir-e Khurd, and the Taghdumbash Pamir a bit further east. Design and © Hermann Kreutzmann.⁴⁷

For generations, the pasture potential seems to have been the major local, economically viable resource that attracted visitors from outside. As a rule, Pamirian dwellers who had settled here sought other sources of income in addition to what support their agricultural and pastoral practices provided.⁸ Those other attractions were connected with transport services for caravans of pilgrims and traders or with gemstone mining. At the same time, the Pamirs functioned as “regions of refuge,” places where people tried to escape slave hunters and evade heavy taxation or detrimental influences from neighboring

Contested Borders and Divided Spaces

Attention to the sparsely inhabited mountain region changed when the Pamirs received some fame as dangerous, remote, and uncontrolled spaces by colonial powers and empires. The 19th-century “Great Game”—a popular phrase to describe the struggle for territorial gains without fighting a war—is often interpreted as a dual contest between Russia and Great Britain for Central Asian dominance. Regional powers such as Afghanistan and China—as well as other contenders such as the ruling elites of Badakhshan, Bukhara, Kashgaria, and Kashmir—are grossly neglected as equally interested parties in the struggle for expanding their spheres of influence. All competitors aimed to further extend their control of the mountains. Knowledge gathering by external investigators followed in a big style which targeted on reducing the so-called blank on the map in a no man’s land or to fill-in cartographic voids.⁹ The Pamirs have formed a space in between that has posed its own challenges.

Explorers, geographers, diplomats, and spies have attempted to grasp the Pamirs’ commercial value and ecological and strategic properties. Most observers have emphasized the pastoral potential for local dwellers and scrutinized the travel conditions and supply situation for armies and visitors.¹⁰ The beginning of increased interest in remote mountain regions came along with the search for the origin and sources of major rivers. John Wood and Mikhail Veniukov were the British and Russian pioneers along the course of the Oxus who have inspired generations to come to refine the geographical knowledge about the Pamirs.¹¹ Their separate explorations in a highly competitive race for territorial dominance and acquisition for geographical knowledge during the second half of the 19th century raised the question of borders, boundaries, frontiers, limits of control, and spheres of influence. The roadmap was prepared for a confrontation between Great Britain and Russia, and of both empires with Afghanistan and China.

After the publication of a Russian map had set the stage and defined the narrow topographical understanding of the Pamirs a British answer was provided by Lord Curzon, the hawkish advocate of an active frontier policy. His treatise on the “Pamirs and the source of the Oxus” summarized the state of knowledge about the Pamirs and its strategic importance for British India.¹² The heated race for territorial domination and creation of imperial spaces led to a number of considerations how to deal with conflicting interests. Few public voices were opposing the appropriation of further space in High Asia. In Great Britain, liberal circles and self-appointed advocates articulated the threat for local people living in the Pamirs and suggested a neutralization of the region. The founder of the Oriental Institute and England’s first mosque at Woking and anti-slavery

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

justified territorial interference as part of the “white man’s burden” or their “mission for the promotion of civilisation” respectively to “civilise” mountain dwellers, nomads, and steppe farmers.¹⁴ In his essay “What Does Asia Mean to Us?,” Fyodor Dostoevsky added the notion that Russia and Asia had common traits and that Russia was only returning to Asia. In heating up the debate in Russia and advocating more activities in conquests he concluded: “But, I repeat, if you’re afraid of England, then don’t leave your house!”¹⁵ The gamble continued and was dominated by the two contestants.

The final decades of the 19th century saw the application of European blueprints in dividing contested spheres of influence. Boundary-making was a bilateral process between Great Britain and Russia, governed by the logic of avoiding a common border of both superpowers. Afghanistan and China functioned as subaltern parties in the negotiations. The “thalweg” or “stromstrich” of a river was the preferred border line; the river course could not everywhere be followed, especially in the high mountain areas of the Pamirs other options were discussed and borderlines preferably followed mountain crests.¹⁶ The Amir of Afghanistan had to sign an agreement in 1893 that delineated the Durand Line, the present boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which confirmed the neutralization and creation of Afghanistan as a buffer state. The remaining border section in the Pamirs was demarcated by a joint Anglo-Russian boundary commission in 1895.¹⁷ As an effect of boundary-making, the European model led to the division of former principalities. The Darwaz, Roshan, Shughnan, Gharan, and Wakhan regions were divided in two parts, with the river functioning as the agreed-upon border line. The northern section of the previously independent principality of Wakhan and the Pamirs were integrated into the Emirate of Bukhara and the Pamir Vilajat of Russian Turkestan.

After the foundation of Tajikistan the northern part of Wakhan vanished as an independent unit and became a section of Rajon Ishkashim in Gorno-Badakhshan (Mountain Badakhshan) in 1932 and the toponym Wakhan was extinguished as an administrative term. The southern section was given as the northeastern-most extension of the Amir of Afghanistan’s controlled area. Abdur Rahman Khan’s demand for more territory in the Pamirs was declined by the superpowers. Afghan Wakhan became an integral part of the Afghan province of Badakhshan; bureaucrats were appointed in Kabul and controlled the administration and borders. Wakhan Woluswali has formed a district in Afghan Badakhshan since.

The former ruler of Wakhan, Mir Ali Mardan Shah, had fled his country in 1883, followed by one quarter of the population. They took refuge first in Chitral and then in Ishkoman, which was part of the Gilgit Agency under British and Kashmiri administration. The division of the petty, poor, and rather powerless fiefdoms had followed the European zeitgeist of boundary-making along rivers. Dividing principalities and areas of common

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

these boundaries supported separate developments that were linked to ideologies and politics in the respective administrative entities.

Effects of Boundary-Making in Gorno-Badakhshan

Tsarist administration in Russian Turkestan effected quite dissimilar developments than would take place in the remote Pamirian corner of Afghan Badakhshan, especially after 1895, when all international borders were demarcated. These differences were aggravated after the October Revolution. It took more than a decade before the effects of the revolution in Russia became felt in the Pamirs. In June 1923, the reorganized administrative structure within the Soviet Union had incorporated the Pamir regions into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as an independent district: Vilajat Gorno-Badakhshan. Two years later, the *Gorno-Badakhshanskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast'* was founded as an autonomous district within the Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of Tajikistan.¹⁹ These administrative changes would trigger a multitude of reforms in infrastructure development, education, and economic and social organization.

Soviet-style modernization efforts had reached the remote corners of the Pamirs. A motor car first crossed the Akbaital Pass (4655 meters) in June 1934; the *Pravda* newspaper carried the headline in Moscow: "A car at the altitude of 5 kilometres."²⁰ The Pamir Highway was inaugurated as a symbol of technological superiority and modernity. The road artery was meant to function only as an internal supply line within the Soviet Union. The Pamir Highway fascinated the ideological and imperial contenders across the borders as no other power had achieved such a feat to date.²¹ Its opening coincides with the closure of international borders for people's movement and commercial exchange. The external boundaries of Gorno-Badakhshan were practically closed by 1935; all official trade with Afghanistan, British India, and China had ceased to exist for more than half a century to come.²² The 1930s were the period of socialist reforms and the implementation of Stalin's purges among party members.

The Pamirian leader Khurram Bokiev was appointed as First Secretary of the Communist Party of *Gorno-Badakhshanskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast'* and became a member of the Central Communist Party Committee of the Soviet Union in 1930, motivating Pamirian dwellers to cooperate in collectivization efforts. Seven years later, Bokiev was arrested; he died in a Siberian concentration camp in 1939.²³ The period is furthermore characterized by a battle against the Ismaili-Shia belief of the Pamirians.²⁴ Many religious

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

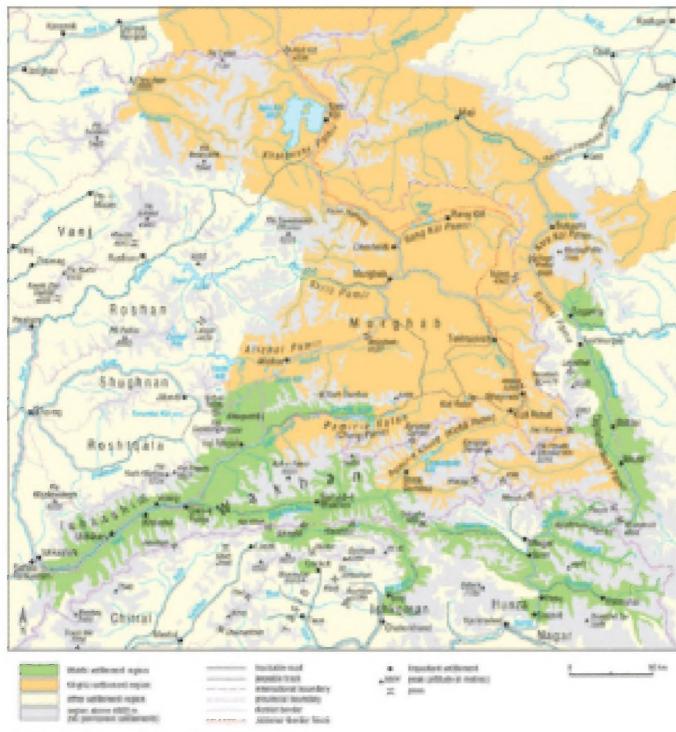
usage improved and contributed in the long run to avoiding previously well-known periods of famine and shortages. Kirghiz nomads were sedentarized and organized in herders' collectives.

The central planning institutions (*gozplan*) attributed mainly pastoral usage to the Pamirian regions; crop farming was grossly neglected as a source of local sustenance. The basic supplies were delivered from far away; the collective farms were reorganized as state farms (*sovkhоз*) of strategic importance along the border. Some Pamirians were forcefully evacuated and resettled in cotton farms of Tajikistan's lowlands. The introduction of educational and health institutions significantly improved the living conditions. Autonomy and nationality policies, through which the "backward" people of the Pamirs were supposed to become equal citizens of the Soviet Union at a faster pace, were applied. Neighbors looked enviously toward the Soviet Pamirs when educational and living standards were at stake. Several intellectuals and scientists of Tajikistan have originated from the Pamirs. Their families often took residence outside the Pamirs and some only returned there during the civil war (1992–1997) after Tajikistan's independence to seek temporary refuge with relatives. Nevertheless, the Tajik Pamirs have proved wrong the modernization theory promise of continuously growing wealth; their inhabitants have experienced a severe loss of quality of life and downfall of socioeconomic standards during the last quarter century.

Revolution and Reforms in Sarikol and the Taghdumbash Pamir of China

With a time delay of one generation, the Chinese Revolution of 1949 followed the Soviet role model in "modernizing" the rural areas and attempted similar reforms in Sarikol. For the first nine years, Soviet consultants advised the Chinese Communist Party to implement similar autonomy and nationality policies all over the country. The breakup of cordial Sino-Soviet relations in 1958 coincided with a phase of major changes in the Chinese Pamirs. The "Great Leap Forward" policies and the so-called democratic reforms had led to a new social setup in Pamirian people's communes (*renmin gongshe*), which controlled all rural resources and organized economic activities. The production brigades (*dadui*) at Kara Köl, Dafdar, and Paik enjoyed central supply lines for basic nutrition and clothing. Previously, Kirghiz nomads had seasonally visited the Kara Köl Pamir (above 3600 meters) during summers and left them during the cold season for staying with their herds in the Kashgar oasis (1200 meters). The post-revolution planners forestalled these seasonal migrations and forced the Kirghiz to leave their traditional pastures and settle in the newly created communes.

Historical Geography of the Pamirs



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 3: The settlement regions of Kirghiz and Wakhi can clearly be distinguished in the Pamirs. The outcome of various settlement processes has led to the exchange of territories that were controlled by either group. Gojal in Gilgit-Baltistan was a Kirghiz pasture prior to the resettlement of Wakhi refugees in several oases in the 19th century. Such exchanges have taken place in the Taghdumbash Pamir, where the Chinese government settled Wakhi in Dafdar, a pasture area formerly used by Kirghiz only, in 1894. Wakhi of Afghan Wakhan have reclaimed certain pastures in the Great and Little Pamirs that were used by Kirghiz prior to their majority exodus in 1978 to Pakistan and subsequent resettlement in Turkey. Design and © Hermann Kreutzmann.

and Taghdumbash Pamir were linked to the Chinese road system in 1958 and externally supplied with goods from government depots.

Twenty years later, Deng Xiaoping's reforms, termed the "four modernizations," (*si hua*) reintroduced privatized agricultural enterprises and have made Kirghiz pastoralists affluent livestock breeders with growing herds that supply the Kashgar market with valuable meat and other products from animal husbandry. Livestock numbers increased significantly and made pastoralism in the Kara Köl Pamir more profitable than in all other Pamirian regions. Since 2009, a new development has taken place that is embedded in the Chinese government's plan of the "great development of the West" and the "Rangeland Ecological Replacement Programme." The observation of overgrazing and pasture degradation has led the authorities to pursue an enforced termination of formerly

Nationality policies in the aftermath of the 1953 population census and the classification of fifty-one nationality minorities (*shaoshu minzu*) had resulted in the identification of two groups as permanently inhabiting the Chinese Pamirs: Kirghiz and Tajik (Fig. 3). The latter term is an adopted generic classification for all Ismaili and Pamirian speakers in China while Kirghiz are identified as speakers of their own language and as Sunni Muslims among others.²⁵ Sedentarization of nomads in permanent winter quarters and collectivization of agricultural resources were the principle outcomes of autonomy and minority policies. Sarikol

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

policies have reached the remote corners of the Pamirs and are instrumental in changing lifestyles and occupations.

Sustenance in the Afghan Pamirs

Similar developments cannot be reported from the Afghan Pamirs. The Pamirian regions in the mountainous province of Badakhshan, such as Darwaz, Roshan, and Shughnan, were cut off from any communication each winter; not much has changed in the accessibility of the Shewa Pamirs (see Fig. 2) to date when it comes to supplies after snowfall. Nevertheless and probably surprisingly, behind seasonally closed mountain passes an educated elite originates from Shughnan that is cut-off from infrastructure assets, but Shughni well-educated migrants have found employment outside the region; in a similar manner, migrants from Darwaz played a significant role in Afghan bureaucracy and politics. The Afghan Pamirs were leading a separate existence in terms of infrastructure development, economic exchange, and social transformation during the monarchy and afterward. The Afghan government commissioned a consultancy report to assess the situation in Afghan Badakhshan in 1976.

Also, very few outsiders visit Badakhshan which means that trade as a whole is poorly organized. It is, therefore, quite understandable that the nomads moving every summer to their pastures in Badakhshan and every fall back to their winter pastures benefit from the prevailing situation by importing goods to Badakhshan at high prices and paying low prices for Badakhshan products to be exported from Badakhshan.²⁷

No roads were leading into the Afghan Pamirs whose inhabitants were enviously looking across the Panj River and viewing Soviet progress in infrastructure assets. The weak economy of Afghanistan failed to invest in the mountainous infrastructure, and the situation hardly improved after the demise of the king. The major exchange option for Pamirian dwellers was to become migrant laborers (*mazduri*) during the poppy harvest in lower Badakhshan or to offer their services for manual labor in the bazaars. In the 1970s, the Amir of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, introduced trophy hunting in the Great Pamir, which ceased to exist after the Saur Revolution in 1978 and the following civil war. In the early 21st century, international nongovernmental institutions have tried to reestablish trophy hunting in the “Big Pamir Wildlife Reserve” and mountaineering as an off-farm source of income. The Pamirian dwellers were dependent on their local agricultural resources.

²⁷Among the Kirghiz leader Khan Rahman Oul had managed to become a very affluent

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

Soviet troops entered Afghanistan after December 1979 and established an army station in the Little Pamir close to Bozai Gumbaz. Though they had expected to return home after a short while, the majority of the Kirghiz followed Rahman Qul in 1982 when the Turkish government had offered to resettle them in Eastern Anatolia. A smaller group did return to the Afghan Pamirs and has led a difficult and independent life there since.

International donors have regularly organized humanitarian support caravans from Tajikistan so the group in the Afghan Pamirs can avoid famine in times of failing supplies from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their Wakhi neighbors (see Fig. 3), who in former times exchanged wheat for livestock products, have been themselves in a very difficult supply situation since the collapse of the Najibullah regime in Kabul and the ensuing takeover by the Taliban. Some crossed the border into Pakistan and have worked there as migrant laborers. To live from the land became more difficult when former exchange patterns failed and sources of off-farm income dried up. The living conditions further deteriorated as opium users increased among the Kirghiz. Businessmen from Badakhshan exchange opium for livestock. At the beginning of the 21st century the herds of all approximately 235 Kirghiz households were smaller than the single one their former Khan Rahman Qul possessed prior to 1978.²⁹ Afghan Badakhshan has been controlled by the commanders of the Northern Alliance, who have taken more than their toll from the impoverished mountain farmers to protect Badakhshan from Taliban attacks. Afghan Wakhan has been a comparatively impoverished region throughout its history and has not been in the position to make any significant change since there are only few niches to generate income from.



Ismaili Modernization in Gojal

Pakistan has no special legislation for nationalities or ethno-linguistic minorities, which is quite similar to the clauses in Afghanistan's constitution. But Gilgit-Baltistan is still under special legislation as it has remained a disputed territory in the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. Since at least the 18th century, Kirghiz and Wakhi have come to Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral as migrants, pastoralists, settlers, and often as refugees who have remained in the region (most of the Wakhi) or have left after some years for a further destination (most of the Kirghiz). The comparatively small Shimshal Pamir in Gilgit-Baltistan has remained a valuable pasture resource of Gojal in the upper Hunza Valley (see Fig. 2). Gojal has become a "region of refuge" for Wakhi mountain farmers since the second half of the 18th century. In different waves settlers have arrived and cultivated the former barren lands and combined crop cultivation with the utilization of *pamér* that Kirghiz nomads had previously used as pastures.³⁰

Marital relationships existed between the rulers of Hunza and Wakhan, and these were instrumental when refugees from Wakhan were seeking a safe haven across borders. Wakhi were accepted by the rulers (*tham*) of Hunza as welcome suppliers of dearly needed foodstuffs and animal products. The Wakhi paid higher taxes than anybody else to the ruling elite in Hunza.³¹ For many generations, Wakhi were excluded from non-agricultural services. Their fate significantly changed when Ismaili community organizations introduced schooling for boys in the 1940s and for girls a generation later in the framework of the Aga Khan Development Network. In the 21st century, Gojal has become one of the leading areas in northern Pakistan in terms of literacy.³² Migrants from Gojal have left agriculture and turned to better-paid professional occupations; their remittances sustain the life of relatives back home in the mountains.³³ Wakhi do not live only in Gojal; there are communities in Ishkoman, Yasin, and in the upper Yarkhun Valley of Chitral (see Fig. 3). These scattered communities have been less integrated into the development schemes of the Aga Khan Development Network; thus, social differences are prevalent and some communities are more on par with their Afghan neighbors.

Contemporary Pamirs

The Pamirs that are located in four countries offer similar ecological properties but are quite different in terms of political developments and socioeconomic integration. The Chinese and Tajik Pamirs have been quite affected by 20th-century sociopolitical reforms, and their inhabitants had to reorient themselves several times. In recent years, Tajikistan has had to rescale its economy and society from being an integral part of the Soviet Union and its central planning system (*gozplan*) into a nation state that has to cope with all challenges independently. The Pamirs within Tajikistan cover approximately 45 percent of its territory but accommodate only 2.5 percent of its population.³⁴ Infrastructure development remains a big challenge and has led to a situation that uses the Pamirs mainly as a thoroughfare for commodity exchange between China and its Central Asian neighbors along reopened or newly built cross-border roads. Pakistan and China have agreed upon an “economic corridor” that permits Pamirian mountain dwellers whose villages are located along the Karakoram Highway (also known as the Pak-China Friendship Highway) to participate in international trade and to reunite with relatives in China.³⁵ The Afghan Pamirs have continued to be rather isolated pastoral regions where discussions are going on among the Kirghiz whether they should leave the Pamirs for a different life in Kyrgyzstan. The government of independent Kyrgyzstan promotes a policy of bringing Kirghiz back to an imagined “homeland.”

The ecological similarities have proved to be of much less significance in shaping people’s lives at the periphery of respective independent countries than colonial interventions, state affiliations, and external interferences. Common traits and separate developments, histories of connection, evasion and exclusion, relations and alienation have contributed to create such diverse entities in the Pamirs that are often neglected in the national narratives of the respective countries. Nevertheless, the Pamirian region has experienced periods of both communication and separation over long periods of time.

Discussion of the Literature

The interest in the Pamirian crossroads was mainly purpose driven. Early travelers were traversing the region in their search of Buddhist wisdom beyond the mountains. Chinese rulers were interested in the limits of their empire and motivated early cartography. The main interest in the area occurred during the Great Game, when advocates of the “forward policy” such as Lord Curzon discussed “scientific” and “natural” boundaries and frontiers.³⁶ In his treatise on the Pamirs, Curzon summarized the state of knowledge and assessed the economic and strategic importance of the region. Remoteness played an important role and the creation of a buffer zone. Russian expansion into Central Asia came to halt in the Pamirs, but control was exercised from the military posts in Khorog and Pamirski Post.³⁷ The main body of Great Game literature is quite similar in Russia and Great Britain; the respective representatives—such as Bronislaw Grombchevsky and Francis Younghusband—who met in the Pamirs were of similar educational background.³⁸ This special interest ended with the demarcation of international boundaries by 1895 and the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907. Afterward, literature on the Pamirian crossroads was produced by a variety of scholars, hunters, mountaineers, and travelers. In addition to climbers, mountaineering expeditions consisted of natural geologists, glaciologists, botanists, linguists and geographers. Their research questions were directed toward extreme environments, “forgotten” languages, and customs in search for centers of “origin.”³⁹

Primary Sources

Early accounts of the Pamirs date back to the Chinese pilgrims, such as Xuanzang, who traversed the Pamirs in the 7th century.⁴⁰ When British, Chinese, and Russian interests in the area increased, in came cartographers and mapmakers, ranging from 18th-century Jesuit employees of the Qing Dynasty to British and Russian officers, as well as clandestine and disguised spies—so-called native explorers who traveled important mountain routes and tried to locate major trading posts, military stations, and oases of commercial interests.⁴¹ The Imperial Geographical Society of St. Petersburg and the Royal Geographical Society of London commissioned expeditions and supported the publication of their results.⁴² The majority of primary sources are locally produced contemporary narratives, travelogues, gazetteers, and intelligence reports of the 19th century that were commissioned by colonial administrative authorities or published by individuals after the end of their journeys and leaving of duty posts.⁴³ A significant body of assessments and observations were recorded prior to and during the Great Game.

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

observations to their respective authorities or service providers. During the final decades of the 19th century began a movement of individual travelers who originated from different European countries and contributed to archaeology, history, botany, and zoology.⁴⁴ Closer to the present day, so-called development experts and consultants from inside and outside the area provided their insights and perceptions for the improvement of living conditions in remote mountain regions. Consequently, the written material available is quite diverse and purpose driven.⁴⁵

Further Reading

Badakhshī, Sang Mu-ammad, and Fazl-alī Bek Surkhafṣar. *Tārīkh-i Badakhshān [History of Badakhshan]*. Edited and translated into Russian by Aleksandr Nicolaevich Boldyrev. Moscow: Восточная литература [Vostochnaya literatura], 1990.

Bobrinskii, Aleksei Alekseevich [Бобринский, Алексей Алексеевич]. *Горцы верховьев Пянджа (Ваханцы-Ишкашимцы) [Mountain People of the Upper Pyandzh. (Vakhanis-Ishkashimis)]*. Moscow: A. A. Levenson, 1908.

Boldyrev, Aleksandr N. *Tarikh-i Badakhshan: istoriia Badakhshana (podgotovil k izdaniiu A.N. Boldyrev)*. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1959.

Faizi, Inayatullah. *The Geo-Political Significance of the Southern Passes of the Wakhan Corridor*. Peshawar: Dissertation University of Peshawar, 1991.

Iloliev, Abdulkamad. "Popular Culture and Religious Metaphor: Saints and Shrines in Wakhan Region of Tajikistan." *Central Asian Survey* 27.1 (2008): 59–73.

Iskandarov, Buxhodor Iskandarovich. *Социально-экономические и политические аспекты истории памирских княжеств (X в.—первая половина XIX в.) [Socioeconomic Aspects in the History of Pamirian Principalities; Tenth to First Half of 19th Century]*. Dushanbe: Donish, 1983.

Koshkaki, Mawlawi Borhān al-din Khān. *Qataghan et Badakhshān. Description du pays d'apres l'inspection d'un ministre afghan en 1922*. Translated into French by Marguerite Reut. Paris: Centre de recherches archéologiques, 1979.

Kreutzmann, Hermann, ed. *Pastoral Practices in High Asia. Agency of "Development" Effected by Modernisation, Resettlement and Transformation*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012.

Kreutzmann, Hermann. *Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015.

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

Kreutzmann, Hermann, and Teiji Watanabe, eds. *Mapping Transition in the Pamirs. Changing Human-Environmental Landscapes*. Cham: Springer, 2016.

Monogarova, Lidia Fedorovna. *Преобразования в быту и культуре припамирских народностей [The Changes of Lifestyle and Culture among the Pamirian Peoples]*. Moscow: Наука [Nauka], 1972.

Postnikov, Alexei V. *Схватка на "Крыше Мира": политики, разведчики и географы в борьбе за Памир в XIX веке (монография в документах)/Общая редакция и предисловие академика В.С. Мясникова [Fight on the "Roof of the World": Politicians, Agents and Geographers in the Struggle for the Pamir in the 19th Century (Monography in documents)/General edition and foreword by V.S. Myasnikov, member of the Academy of Sciences]*. Moscow: Памятники исторической мысли [Monuments of the Historical Idea], 2001.

Shahrani, Mohib Nazif. "Epilogue: Coping with a 'Communist' Revolution, State Failure, and War." In *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War*. Edited by Mohib Nazif Shahrani, 230–268. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.

Sumarakov, Leonid Ivanovich. *История российской пограничной охраны на Тянь-Шане и Памире [History of Russian Border Protection in Tien Shan and Pamir]*. Bishkek: Printhouse, 2006.

Notes:

(1.) Carl Ritter, *Die Erdkunde Von Asien. Siebenter Theil. Drittes Buch. Band 5. West-Asien. Übergang Von Ost- Nach West-Asien* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1837).

(2.) The question of whether Marco Polo visited the Pamirs or not is an ongoing debate. See Okimir Egiševič Agachanjanc, "Der Pamir im Buch des Marco Polo. Zum Reisebeginn vor 700 Jahren," *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen* 116 (1972): 53–57; Peter Jackson, "Marco Polo and his 'Travels,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61.1 (1998): 82–101; Wolfgang Lentz, "War Marco Polo auf dem Pamir?," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 11 (1932): 1–32. The comments by Henry Yule were included in a new edition of his narrative: Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 3d ed., 2 vols., ed. and trans. Henry Yule (London: John Murray, 1903).

(3.) A discussion of the terms and roots is provided in Hermann Kreutzmann, "Pamirian

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

(46.) Illustration modified from Hermann Kreutzmann, "Pamir or Pamirs: Perceptions and Interpretations," in *Mapping Transition in the Pamirs: Changing Human-Environmental Landscapes*, ed. Hermann Kreutzmann and Teiji Watanabe (Cham: Springer, 2016), 19.

(4.) George Nathaniel Curzon, "The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus," *The Geographical Journal* 8 (1896):15-54, 97-119, 239-264, here 28; René Grousset, *Die Reise nach Westen oder wie Hsüan Tsang den Buddhismus nach China holte* (Cologne: Eugen Diederichs, 1986), 219; Alexander von Humboldt, *Zentral-Asien: Untersuchungen zu den Gebirgsketten und zur vergleichenden Klimatologie. Aus dem Französischen übersetzt und durch Zusätze vermehrt herausgegeben von Dr. Wilhelm Mahlmann*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Carl J. Kleemann, 1844), vol. II, p. 402; Nicolas Severtzow, "Études de géographie historiques sur les anciens itinéraires à travers le Pamir. Ptolémée, Hiouen-Thsang, Song-Yuen, Marco Polo," *Bulletin de la Société de géographie* 7.11 (1890): 417-477, here 463.

(5.) Kreutzmann, "Pamirian Spaces."

(6.) See the map of language distribution and the table of linguistic affiliations in Hermann Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 484-485.

(7.) See the extensive discussion about economic strategies and religious affiliations in Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 127-149.

(47.) Illustration modified from Kreutzmann, "Pamir or Pamirs: Perceptions and Interpretations," 26.

(8.) Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 151-165.

(9.) The phrase became later on a title of a book by Eric Shipton, *Blank on the Map* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938). For the exploratory phase, see Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 69-112.

(10.) Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 22-42.

(11.) John Wood, *A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus by the Route of the Indus, Kabul, and Badakhshan: In the Years 1836, 1837 and 1838* (London: John Murray, 1841); Michail Ivanovich Veniukov, "The Pamirs and the Sources of the Amu Darya," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 36 (1866): 248-265.

(12.) Map of the Pamir, edited by information from the Imperial Russian Geographical Society [Карта Памира, изд. Изв. Императорского Русского географического общества]. St. Petersburg, 1885. Curzon (1896) published three articles in the

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

- (14.) Michael Futrell, "Dostoyevsky and Islam (and Chokan Valikhanov)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 57.1 (1979): 16–31; Milan Hauner, *What Is Asia to Us? Russia's Heartland Yesterday and Today* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Kalpana Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient. Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia* (Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1997); see as well Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 345.
- (15.) Fyodor Michailovich Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, vol. 2, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 1378; see as well Kreutzmann, *Wakhan Quadrangle*, 39–40.
- (16.) Garry John Alder, *British India's Northern Frontier 1865–95: A Study in Imperial Policy* (London: Longmans, 1963); Alastair Lamb, *Asian Frontiers: Studies in a Continuing Problem* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968); Alexei V. Postnikov, "Cartography and Boundary-Making on the Pamir (Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries)" *Terra Incognitae* 30 (1998): 72–93.
- (17.) Thomas Hungerford Holdich, "Narrative of the Proceedings of the Pamir Boundary Commission," in *Report on the Pamir Boundary Commission*, ed. Montague Gilbert Gerard, Thomas Hungerford Holdich, Robert Alexander Wahab, and Alfred William Alcock (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1897), 12–28; Alexei V. Postnikov, *Схватка На "Крыше Мира": Политики, Разведчики И Географы В Борьбе За Памир В XIX Веке* (Монография В Документах)/*Общая Редакция И Предисловие Академика В.С. Мясникова [Fight on the "Roof of the World": Politicians, Agents and Geographers in the Struggle for the Pamir in the 19th Century (Monography in Documents)/General Edition and Foreword by V. S. Myasnikov, Member of the Academy of Sciences]* (Moscow: Памятники исторической мысли [Monuments of the Historical Idea], 2001).
- (18.) Sabine Felmy and Hermann Kreutzmann, "Wakhan Woluswali in Badakhshan: Observations and Reflections from Afghanistan's Periphery," *Erdkunde* 58.2 (2004): 97–117; Hermann Kreutzmann, "Boundary-Making as a Strategy for Risk Reduction in Conflict-Prone Spaces," in *The Spatial Dimension of Risk. How Geography Shapes the Emergence of Riskscapes*, ed. Detlef Müller-Mahn (Milton Park: Routledge, 2013), 154–171.
- (19.) See, for the administrative reforms, Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 371.
- (20.) *The Pravda*, no. 139, May 22, 1934, p. 6; see the reproduction of the newspaper clip in Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 116.

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

- (24.) Otambek Mastibekov, *Leadership and Authority in Central Asia: The Ismaili Community in Tajikistan* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2014), 83-111.
- (25.) For a detailed analysis of transformations in the Chinese Pamirs, see Hermann Kreutzmann, "Kirghiz in Little Kara Köl—the Forces of Modernisation in Southern Xinjiang," in *Pastoral Practices in High Asia. Agency of "Development" Effected by Modernisation, Resettlement and Transformation*, ed. Hermann Kreutzmann (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 109-125; Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 385-388.
- (26.) Hermann Kreutzmann, "The Tragedy of Responsibility in High Asia: Modernizing Traditional Pastoral Practices and Preserving Modernist Worldviews," *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* 3.7 (2013); Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 463-467.
- (27.) Finnconsult, *Socio-Economic Survey of Badakhshan. Sectoral Reports* (Kabul: The Republic of Afghanistan. Ministry of Planning, 1976), 31.
- (28.) M. Nazif Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1979); M. Nazif Shahrani, "Epilogue: Coping with a 'Communist' Revolution, State Failure, and War," in *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War*, ed. M. Nazif Shahrani (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 230-268.
- (29.) This is an observation from the author's own fieldwork and is cited in Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 356-357.
- (30.) Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 208-210.
- (31.) Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 407-415.
- (32.) Most recent source: Andreas Benz, "Framing Modernization Interventions: Reassessing the Role of Migration and Translocality in Sustainable Mountain Development in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan," *Mountain Research and Development* 36 (2016): 141-152.
- (33.) Andreas Benz, "Multilocality as an Asset: Translocal Development and Change among the Wakhi of Gojal, Pakistan," in *Tracing Connections: Explorations of Spaces and Places in Asian Contexts*, ed. Andreas Benz and Henryk Alff (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2014), 111-138.
- (34.) Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 372.
- (35.) Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 395, 456-458.

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

1907); and George Nathaniel Curzon, *On the Indian Frontier* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

(37.) Andrei Jevgenievich Snyesreff [Snesarev], "Eastern Bokhara. A Military and Geographical Description by Lt. Col. Snyesaref, Russian General Staff, translated in Intelligence Branch, Division of Chief of Staff, Simla, 1906 (Simla: Government of India, 1909); Leonid Ivanovich Sumarakov, *Istorija Rossijskoj Pogranitshnoj Ohrany Na Tjan'-Shane I Pamire [History of Russian Border Protection in Tien Shan and Pamir]* (Bishkek: Printhouse, 2006).

(38.) See their own accounts and commentaries, such as Bronislaw L. Grombchevsky [Grąbczewski], *Наши Интересы На Памире [Our Interests in the Pamirs]*, (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennaya Publichnaya Biblioteka, 1891); Baskhanov Mikhail Kazbekovich, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Kolesnikov, and Mariya Fyodorovna Matveeva, eds., *Дервиш Гиндукуша: Путевые Дневники Центральноазиатских Экспедиций Генерала Б. Л. Громбчевского [The Dervish of the Hindukush: Travel Diaries of the Central Asia Expeditions of General B. L. Grombchevskii]*, (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, 2015); William Barnes Steveni, "Colonel Grambcheffsky's Expeditions in Central Asia, and Recent Events on the Pamirs," *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record* N. S. 3 (1892): 17-52; Francis Edward Younghusband, "Journeys in the Pamirs and Adjacent Countries," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* 14 (1892): 205-234; Francis Edward Younghusband, *The Heart of a Continent* (London: John Murray, 1896). Their meeting in the Pamirs is discussed in Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 92-96.

(39.) See as specimens out of a vast literature, Scott C. Matsushita Bailey, *Travel, Science and Empire: The Russian Geographical Society's Expeditions to Central Eurasia, 1845-1905* (Manoa: University of Hawaii, 2008); Hans von Ficker and Willi Rickmer Rickmers, eds., *Wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse der Alai-Pamir-Expedition 1928. Drei Teile in sechs Bänden. Teil I: Geodätische, Topographische und Glaziologische Ergebnisse* (Richard Finsterwalder), *Teil II: Geologische Untersuchungen im nordwestlichen Pamir-Gebiet und Mittleren Transalai* (Ludwig Nöth), *Teil III: Beiträge zur Faunistik des Pamir-Gebietes* (William Fred Reinig) (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, Ernst Vohsen, 1932); Robert Michell, "The Russian Expedition to the Alai and Pamir," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 47 (1877): 17-47; Charles Adolphus Murray, *The Pamirs: Being a Narrative of a Year's Expedition on Horseback and on Foot through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary, and Russian Central Asia*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1893); Ole Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs: The Second Danish Pamir Expedition 1898-1899* (London: William Heinemann, 1904); Marc Aurel Stein, *On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks: Brief Narratives of Three Expeditions in Innermost Asia and North-Western China* (London:

Historical Geography of the Pamirs

Monk's Shadow. A Journey in the Footsteps of Xuanzang (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2005).

(41.) Hermann Kreutzmann, *Wakhan Quadrangle. Exploration and espionage during and after the Great Game* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017); James A Millward, “‘Coming onto the Map’: ‘Western Regions,’ Geography and Cartographic Nomenclature in the Making of Chinese Empire in Xinjiang,” *Late Imperial China* 20.2 (1999): 61–98; Postnikov, “Cartography and Boundary-Making on the Pamir,” 72–93; Derek John Waller, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990).

(42.) See, for example, Bailey, *Travel, Science and Empire*; Robert Michell, “The Russian Expedition to the Alai and Pamir,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 47 (1877): 17–47; Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, “Monograph on the Oxus,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 42 (1872): 482–513.

(43.) See Edmund George Barrow, *Gazetteer of the Eastern Hindu Kush in Four Parts* (Simla, India: Government Central Press, 1888); Hermann Kreutzmann, *Wakhan Quadrangle* (2017); Henry Charles Baskerville Tanner, *Geographical Explorations in and around Badakhshán: Introductory Account with Geographical Notes* (Dehra Dun: Survey of India, 1883); Veniukov, “The Pamirs and the Sources of the Amu Darya”, 248–265; and Michail Ivanovich Veniukov, *Опыт Военного Обозрения Русских Границ В Азии [Experience of the Military Supervision of the Asian Frontiers]*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: V. Bezobrazov, 1873–1876). For an exhaustive bibliography of archival sources, see Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 496–510.

(44.) See Jack Autrey Dabbs, *History of the Discovery and Exploration of Chinese Turkestan*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1963); Svetlana Gorshenina, *Explorateurs en Asie centrale: Voyageurs et aventuriers de Marco Polo à Ella Maillart* (Lausanne: Editions Olizane, 2003).

(45.) For a bibliographic compilation of relevant primary sources, see Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads*, 510–546; Kreutzmann, *Wakhan Quadrangle*, 266–268.

Hermann Kreutzmann

Freie Universität Berlin



Historical Geography of the Pamirs

